

Case Study - The Bully

Introduction

The case study approach of this module has been designed to create an awareness of the general classroom behavioral problems that may be encountered on a day to day basis. The examples here are generalised and may be applied to situations other than the ones given here.

Description of the problem

Ned is a sixth-grader who constantly bullies other children and ends up in fights. It's a rare day when Ned doesn't get into one scrape or another. In class, Ned is an average student and is generally cooperative unless he gets into a fight with another student. The other students are beginning to avoid Ned. They don't like talking to him for fear that it will lead to a fight. Some children are actually terrified of Ned.

Causes

The overriding cause of the bully's behavior is insecurity. If the student were more secure with himself or herself, the student would not need to prove how powerful he or she is. Related to insecurity is the reinforcing nature of controlling another human being. Students like Ned are trying to prove that they 'call the shots' by beating up anyone who comes along.

Goal

The student will stop fighting and develop a more positive self-image.

The Plan:

Step 1:

Increase the number of positive interactions between you and the student. Because the primary cause of this problem is related to the student's feelings of insecurity, focus on building the individual's self-concept and sense of security. This may seem like a circuitous way to attack the problem, but it is essential. Attempts to implement the subsequent steps of the plan will be ineffective if you are not first successful in elevating the student's self-concept.

Step 2:

Design a strategy for punishing students who fight. The consequence you decide upon should be discussed with the entire class. Everyone must understand that the consequence will apply to anyone who is caught fighting, no matter who started the fight. 'Owing time' is a very good strategy for punishing this behavior. Whenever students are found fighting, everyone directly involved will owe five minutes off of recess or a free-time period.

Don't attempt to discern who started the fight. Anyone caught fighting will owe time-period. At first this may seem to be an unreasonable procedure, since the bully is obviously the student with the problem. However, all students must learn to avoid fighting and to handle their differences in more acceptable ways. Enforcing the consequence across the board shows the bully and the other students that you are not punishing the bully, you are punishing the behavior of fighting.

If fighting sometimes occurs on the playground, discuss the problem with the person who monitors the students during recess. Ask the monitor to send all of your students involved in a fight back to the classroom. Make sure the recess supervisor understands that all students involved in the fight forfeit their recess, not just the student who started the fight.

Step 3:

Design a reinforcer for the student when he or she can go an entire day without fighting. Since the student's problem emanates from a poor self-image, establish a reinforcer that will give him or her a certain level of responsibility. Getting to tutor a younger student is a powerful reinforcer for this type of student. Check with one of your colleagues who teaches a lower grade than you do. See if the teacher would allow your student to help one of his or her students. The 'helping' can be as simple as listening to the younger student read, or as involved as helping the younger student work arithmetic problems. Make sure that your student's skills are adequate for the type of tasks he or she will be asked to perform. The tutorial session should take place at the end of the day, but only if the student has not been in a fight. If the student has been in a fight, he or

she should not be allowed to tutor that day. Each day is a fresh start. If the student does not make it without fighting on Monday, Tuesday morning start with a clean slate. The student must see that one failure only affects the day of the fight and no more.

Step 4:

Determine how to monitor situations when you will not be there, such as in the cafeteria, halls, restroom, and so on. What will you do if a student tells you that the bully was in a fight? Ignore it. The best procedure to follow is to base your actions on the student's own evaluation of whether or not he or she was in a fight. After each recess period, lunch period, and so on, ask the student how he or she did. If you have been working diligently on improving the student's self-image, it's unlikely that this procedure will backfire. If the student is honest and tells you that he or she was in a fight, don't allow the student to tutor that day, but praise the student for his or her honesty and maturity. Encourage the student to do better the next day.

If you think that the student might have been in a fight, but denies it, do not call him or her a liar. Take the student's word for it; allow him or her to tutor that day. You don't want to confront the student with a charge that you cannot prove. If the student lies to you, he or she is telling you that you haven't done enough to elevate the student's self-image.